

# **RAF Webinar: Addressing Child Marriage in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in times of Increased Uncertainty, Violence, and Displacement / 22 October 2025**

## **English Transcript**

**Evita Mouawad, RAF Coordinator, starts the webinar and welcomes everyone**

**Speaker #1: Abeer Joma'a – Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Palestine**

Thank you all. I am Abeer Joma'a, Chief Protection Officer in the UNICEF in Gaza. Today we will talk about the national overview of the child marriage in Palestine, OPT, Gaza, West Bank and East Jerusalem. Of course, because we have a shortage of information in East Jerusalem, I will focus more on Gaza and the West Bank.

When we look at the most recent statistics or a statistical review of the Palestinian system, we find that the latest data dates to 2019-2020. As a result, the available information providing a comprehensive overview is limited and insufficient.

When we take an overview of the available data related to child marriage in Palestine, we say that the latest review of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics shows that 24% of Palestinian women got married before 18 years of age, 30% in Gaza and 20% in the West Bank. This was in 2019, and this is the last comprehensive review of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. What about the data available before 2024? The data was much higher before.

From 1990 onward, the rate was around 36-37%, and this trend continued until the comprehensive review conducted in 2020. After that, we had some studies and efforts from some UN agencies, such as the UNFPA, the UNRWA, and the Women's Affairs Center, and they presented some local data. We will discuss the report of the UNFPA.

The UNFPA reported that 71% of the youth observed increased pressure on girls to marry early, that there is pressure from families that girls must get married early. It was also reported that 56% of girls got married before 18 years of age. A study from the Women's Affairs Center reported that 167 girls aged between 14 and 16 got married as a negative coping mechanism due to the current situation in the war.

Those statistics are based on all the studies about child marriage. We also have an important source of information about child marriage, which is Sharia Court, the legal court in Palestine. We obtained some data from the legal court; however, the information provided was limited to Gaza. No data was made available for the West Bank, either because it could not be shared or because access was denied. Our information covers the period from June to October 2024 (five months). During that time, a total of 4905 marriage contracts were registered in the Gaza Strip; out of these 401 involved girls aged between 14 and 16.

This data does not include girls aged between 17 and 18. This means that the number could be higher if we included girls aged between 17 and 18. The most comprehensive statistics we got from them covered a longer period from January 2024 to August 2025 (20 months).

In this statistic, it was discovered that 28,902 marriage contracts were registered. Of these, 20% involved children under 18, which is approximately 5,780 child marriages. This shows an increase in marriage contracts for children under the age of 18, 17, 16, and 15 years old.

This increase is mainly due to the displacement of girls and families in the Gaza Strip from the north to the south of the Gaza Strip. It is also due to the increased economic burden, hunger, and many other factors that forced families to re-marry their girls as a kind of adaptation to the difficult conditions they are living in. We also have a source of information, which is the Child Protection Case Management Trend.

This information is available in the UNICEF Child Protection Area of Responsibility, specifically in the Case Management Task Force. We started collecting information from the organizations in January 2024. Between January 2024 and June 2025 (throughout a year and a half), 44,204 cases of case management were registered in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Out of these, only 96 cases were identified as child marriage cases and received services. Compared to the number of people who received case management services and compared to what we mentioned a while ago about the number of registered cases of marriage contracts in the legal court, and compared to the statistics, this number (96 cases) is very minimal (no more than 0.22%). These are the identified child marriage cases. This also goes back to many reasons, including that people do not count child marriage as a case of protection or issue of protection, so it is not reported.

Even when we collect and record case management data, the same married child may be recorded as a case of physical, sexual or psychological harm, or any type of harm, rather than a case of child marriage. As a result, we have a gap in our information about child marriage, even in the process of case management.

Now we will talk about case management information but divided quarterly. In quarters 1 and 2 in 2024, (January to June 2024), we have 12,750 total cases reported, of which 53 are child marriage cases. In quarter 4, we have 5,240 case management cases, of which 18 are child marriage cases.

In the next quarter, we have 7,072 case management cases, of which 12 are child marriage cases. In the last quarter, we have 6,849, of which 4 are child marriage cases. We also notice that most of the reported child marriage cases are in Gaza Strip and not in the West Bank.

For example, out of the 53 child marriage cases in quarters 1 and 2 in 2024 (January to June 2024), 52 of them in the Gaza Strip, and one case in the West Bank. In quarter 4 of 2024, all 18 cases are reported in the Gaza Strip, of which 14 are child marriage cases in the West Bank. This can be attributed to the greater focus on child protection services in the Gaza Strip compared to the West Bank, particularly following the outbreak of the war in Gaza. Those are explanations, and not recommendations. I am explaining why these numbers exist in the Gaza Strip more than in the West Bank.

Another source of information is the UNICEF Health Section data. We found that 352 girls under the age of 18 received postnatal services compared to 4,100 women. In addition, 1,383 pregnant girls under 18 attended antenatal care services.

What about national data gaps? We mentioned earlier that there is a gap in the available data and statistics on the Palestinian level for child marriages because the latest census dates to 2019-2020.

The gap is also due to the absence of regular data collection from the legal courts. Access to this data is inconsistent: at times it is granted, at other times it is not. In some cases, data is provided for a limited time period, while in others it covers a longer timeframe. At times we are provided with numbers, at other times with percentages.

Our limited data from the health and nutrition departments give us certain indicators, but these are not all the married girls who can receive health care during pregnancy or postpartum.

There may also be unregistered cases of child marriage. In addition, within case management systems, some cases are recorded under different risk categories rather than being identified specifically as child marriage. As a result, these cases are not counted as child marriages, and their actual number remains unknown. There are also cases in which families do not seek case management services because they do not consider marriage at the age of 18 to be a child protection risk.

The gap in the West Bank is largely due to the stronger focus on the Gaza Strip in light of the ongoing emergency situation.

I will quickly go over the Child Marriage Services available: services for self-management, services for mental health and social support, health services and protective care, legal services, including legal counselling or representation in court. It is very important to talk about the protection services because they include safe shelters (sometimes they are needed), and the top-up protection cash or the multi-purpose cash for protective cases. There are also some activities related to prevention and risk mitigation, such as awareness sessions for children, caregivers, community members and community leaders.

**Speaker #2: Sana Asi Yassin, Gender & GBV Programme Officer, UNFPA Palestine**

Thank you, Evita, and good evening, everyone.

My name is Sana Asi Yassin. I'm a gender and GBV Program Officer at UNFPA in Palestine. My presentation will be about some legal loopholes and the legal reality when it comes to the Palestinian marriage laws.

Until 2019, the laws that were in place in the Palestinian lands, in the West Bank, for example, the Jordanian Personal Conditions Act of 1976, which set the age of marriage to 14 and a half years, 14 years and 6 months. And the Egyptian Family Rights Act in the Gaza Strip, which set the age of marriage to 16 years and 7 months. But in 2019, a law was passed, number 21, which set the age of marriage to 18 years.

However, this law includes amendments and even exceptions. This exception allows a special court, in specific cases, to authorize the marriage of a person under the age of 18 if it determines that the marriage serves the best interests of both parties. Such approval must be granted by a judge of the Palestinian courts or by the relevant religious authorities of other sects. Once marriage is approved under this exception, it confers full legal capacity with respect to marriage, separation, divorce, and all related legal consequences.

The Palestinian Authority enacted the Palestinian Child Law, which establishes 18 years as the legal age of adulthood. This means that individuals reach full legal capacity at 18 and can enter into legal contracts, including marriage. The law prohibits short-term marriages, forced marriages, and any practice that pressures girls to leave school for the purpose of marrying. It also imposes penalties on parents who violate the law by arranging the marriage of their daughters before the age of 18.

However, this law is often systematically disregarded, particularly in the early stages of marriage, where Islamic Sharia is applied instead. There has been limited enforcement of the law. Under Islamic Sharia, judges consider physical maturity when determining eligibility for marriage. Additionally, they have the authority to approve marriages for girls below the age of 18 based on their judgment, including in cases involving rape or unintended pregnancy.

This authority has the power to grant exceptions and justifications that override the law, particularly regarding decisions based on the legal provisions we discussed earlier. As a result, such exceptions often become the standard in many early-stage marriages. However, under Islamic Sharia, the concept of maturity is also recognized, and in other cases, full legal maturity is 18 years of age.

For example, at the age of 18, girls reach legal maturity and are entitled to receive their inheritance. They can manage their money and property independently, without the need for a mediator. Therefore, while marriage may be permitted before the age of 18 under certain exceptions, the legal age of 18 is strictly applied in other matters such as managing finances or inheritance.

In fact, between 2019 and 2023, there were 10,000 cases of child marriage registered, most involving children, falling under the "legal exceptions". This study was carried out by the Center for Social and Economic Policy in Ramallah. There is a clear contradiction given the fact that the State of Palestine, the Palestinian Authority, agreed to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

There is a strong basis to address early marriage, as it constitutes a violation of human rights and poses serious risks to the health, education, and well-being of girls. Palestine is also committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and regularly reports on its progress, including measures taken to achieve Target 5.3, which aims to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage. Therefore, early marriage violates all these rights and contravenes the international conventions to which the Palestinian Authority is a party, such as CEDAW and CRC, as well as the domestic law that established 18 as the legal age.

There is a clear violation of the obligations related to human rights, even within the framework of the domestic law, in addition to challenging the civil and legislative judicial systems. This is also a very big challenge, especially when it comes to issues related to marriage, both in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Following the 2023 war on Gaza, there has been a significant rise in the factors contributing to and enabling early marriage.

For example, war has resulted in widespread destruction and displacement, the loss of necessities, and has forced children out of school for the second consecutive year, in addition to worsening health conditions. In the West Bank as well, policies of eviction and displacement, rising unemployment among families, and deepening poverty have further aggravated the situation. There are also ongoing legal violations, while the Palestinian Authority exercises control over only limited areas.

There are also areas under the control and absolute Israeli rule in the West Bank. These are some of the most important enablers of early marriage. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in collaboration with and in support of its partners, has developed strategies aimed at reducing early marriage.

Therefore, there is support for national efforts to prepare legislation to end early marriage, and to adopt a family protection law. Support is also provided for initiatives that promote girls' empowerment and strengthen their awareness and understanding of their health, their circumstances, and the changes associated with puberty, including what it entails and the needs that follow. In addition, assistance is extended to already married girls, particularly around reproductive health, while encouraging birth spacing and family planning.

The UNFPA is working to strengthen the capacities of national committees, such as the National Committee to Combat Violence, enhance the role of human rights and women's organizations in advocating for the enactment of a family protection law, cooperate with community leaders, and religious figures in addressing negative phenomena such as violence against women and early marriage.

In addition, UNFPA supports the protection of families from poverty and the lack of basic services, particularly in marginalized and isolated areas.

We support national initiatives, including those led by the Ministry of Health, such as premarital counseling programs for newlyweds, as well as efforts to strengthen reproductive health services, particularly for adolescents at the age of puberty.

In 2024, we found that about 25% of births are for girls under the age of 18. This is a striking and serious number. We also work to support national efforts to implement national policy for premarital counseling, approved by judicial and legislative bodies, and with extremely limited exceptions.

### **Speaker #3: Amal Syam, Head, Women's Affairs Center (WAC), Gaza**

Good evening, everyone. Thank you for organizing this webinar, which addresses a critical and serious issue. I would also like to thank my colleagues for summarizing much of the discussion on the legal framework and contextual background.

I am speaking after listening to my colleagues so that I can build on their points and continue from where they left off. Regarding early marriage in the context of genocide, we have chosen the title "Between the Hammer of War and the Anvil of Forced Marriage." This reflects the reality that girls are caught between two harsh and devastating forces: the impact of war on one hand, and early marriage with its serious consequences, on the other.

There is clearly a violation of human rights, and a violation of the rights of children and girls. They are deprived of all their rights.

The truth is that at the beginning of the war on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, and when the war was at its peak in November and December, marriage was not a common occurrence. But as the war went on, people started talking about marriage as if they were talking about something normal. Even judges would say "why are you surprised? This is a normal human subject, like food and drink."

As a result, we began examining issues related to marriage and the ages of girls who were married at that time, considering that the justice institutions had been destroyed and the courts were largely non-operational. Only transitional courts were functioning, particularly in Deir al-Balah and southern Gaza.

We now have individuals who can provide insight into the issues of early marriage and its impact on girls. Notably, judges have reported cases of unregistered and unauthorized marriages involving children. Specifically, we are referring to forced marriages of girls under the age of 18. I say "forced" because even if there was consent from the parties of the marriage, they are underage, and they are not responsible for their decisions, so the judge cannot say "she agreed and consented with her will, and she was happy, and so on".

My colleagues Abeer and Sana have discussed the scale of the phenomenon. I can say that the Central Bureau of Statistics has always observed that Gaza has the highest rates of unregistered early marriage. The rate of unregistered early marriage in 2021 was 12% of all women who were married that year, and 19% of which were in Gaza. With the current efforts of the institutions, I don't want to say that the rate began to decrease a lot, but we began to notice that there was a decrease in people's tendency towards early marriage. But unfortunately, during the war, the phenomenon reappeared.

During the war, there were no accurate statistics on early marriage, and my colleagues mentioned that we relied on our female lawyers going to the judge, and the judge told them to take these records, search them, and see if this is early marriage or not, because there are no computerized things, and there is nothing organized, and those who come to register the marriage are already there. Based on available numbers,

early marriages accounted for over 20% of registered contracts, approximately one-quarter of all marriages. Of these, 12% involved girls under the age of 16.

Here comes the law and the violations thereof. Did the war create fertile soil to practice early marriage for girls? The answer is yes, because the consequences of the war at all levels were a justification for families to marry off their daughters.

We documented 50 cases of early marriage through interviews with married girls, as well as with male and female judges and lawyers. Some families explained that ongoing displacement, poverty, unmet basic needs, and living in overcrowded shelters heightened their fears for their daughters' safety. As a result, they chose to marry them off, effectively transferring responsibility to others in an attempt to relieve themselves of that burden.

In addition, the bad economic situation during the war, and the absence of sources of income also made families think of marrying their daughters as a mechanism to adapt to war, thinking that this would reduce the burden and the costs. Unfortunately, we found that some girls returned to their families with children, even during the war. My colleagues have already discussed the law, so I won't go into it again, but it is outdated. The law permits marriage and includes exceptions, even in the Gaza Strip. It prohibits marriage for girls under 9 years old, as if it implicitly allows marriage for those aged 9 to 17, since the legal marriage age for girls is 17, with certain exceptions. In the Gaza Strip, Decision 87 of 1995 sets the age at 15 for girls and 16 for boys, where 15 years is interpreted as 14 years and 7 months.

Another factor in the field is that early marriage is deeply rooted in societal customs and traditions. It is part of the culture, so even during the war, people find it difficult to abandon these practices. Early marriage existed before the war and continues during it. Families accustomed to marrying off their daughters or sons at a young age, or arranging marriages between young boys and girls, tend to continue this practice. This persistence is further reinforced when considering the relationship between cousin marriage and early marriage, because we have seen cases where girls say "I got married to my uncle's son without my consent, and this is a normal tradition in the family, I cannot object because this happened to my sisters before, and this happened to my relatives before."

Of course, the cost of marriage decreased in the war. As a result, families were encouraged to marry off their children. There were no traditional celebrations, no feasts, no expensive dowries, and none of the usual marriage customs. Marriages often involved simply moving girls from one tent to another within the same shelter. There is also a historical factor dating back to the days of UNRWA: when aid was linked to married households, families were motivated to marry their children to qualify for support and vouchers. This created a strong incentive for families to push in that direction.

The next slide focuses on the impact of early marriage on girls. I won't go into detail because we all understand that marrying young girls affects every aspect of their lives psychologically, physically, and

economically, and deprives them of education. The collapse of the educational system has further pushed parents toward marrying off their daughters. One parent even asks, "Do you see where the schools are? Are there schools to help them grow?" There are many such concerns and discussions. So, what are institutions doing to address early marriage? At the Center for Women's Affairs, along with organizations like UNFPA and UNICEF, we are committed to combating this phenomenon wherever it occurs and by any means possible. I remember that in the 90s, we had a slogan "Stop early marriage". In 1995, the slogan was "Stop and think before early marriage". So, a lot of effort was made to limit early marriage, and there were media campaigns, and advocacy campaigns to change the laws.

Sana talked about the 2019 Law. We fought until we reached the point where the legal age of marriage in the West Bank is set at 18 for both girls and boys. However, the problem lies in the exceptions.

In Gaza, the situation remained the same where the 1954 Law is still in force. Imagine, we still follow the 1954 Law!

We provide multiple services for girls, for married women, and for pregnant women. We provide awareness, health care, legal consultations, mental and psychological health services, and many other services for girls, both married women and unmarried girls. And frankly, it has been proven that joint efforts lead to change.

I just want to tell you two stories. One example involves our interventions with parents, mothers, and girls through social and psychological support sessions, recreational activities for women, and many other programs. Despite these efforts, cultural norms, customs, and traditions continue to remain an issue. The law should be the main tool for preventing early marriage, and it must be respected. If the law prohibited early marriage, such violations would not occur.

We spotted 50 cases and documented them. I can send you the booklet that published those stories, of course, in partnership with the UNFPA. Two stories drew my attention.

One story involved a 16-year-old girl who got married within a week. On her wedding day, she reported that the gold given to her as a gift was taken under the pretext of safekeeping. Even basic items, such as food, could be withheld. In this instance, the couple was able to rent a house to live in, which is considered an exception. In most cases, girls are married into tents or homes that lack even the most basic necessities. From the very beginning, this girl was exposed to violence in every form, both from her husband and her in-laws. She suffered two miscarriages within just six months. Imagine the extent of the violence, the severity of her health condition, and the weight of her psychological suffering. Every form of abuse is reflected in the story of Raghda, who is only 16 years old.

There is also the story of Malak. Malak is a young girl under the age of 16. Her family is extremely poor, and both of her parents have severe disabilities — a situation that became even worse during the war.

A young man used to visit their tent to bring aid, food, and clothes. Each time he came, he saw Malak. Eventually, he became interested in her and asked her parents for her hand in marriage. Despite her young age, her parents pressured her to accept. They justified it by saying their situation would improve, that he would continue bringing them assistance, and that, God willing, things would get better.

Three days later, Malak got married. After that, he hung up the phone and disappeared. It is no longer known where Malak's husband is. She was divorced after that. These are scary stories when we talk about early marriage.

Perhaps the most striking part of these girls' stories is that we did not find a single one who married early and would advise others to do the same. Unfortunately, yet in some way fortunately, not one of them recommended early marriage.

They all say the same thing: "If I could turn back time, I would never marry young. I would never get married during the war. I do not advise any girl to marry in these circumstances."

They describe themselves as children who suddenly became responsible for pregnancies they carry, or for babies they have already given birth to while they are still children themselves.

They say, "We are still young, yet we carry burdens far beyond our age." And many of them express a deep sense of loss, saying that all their hopes and dreams have disappeared.

Some of them wanted to become doctors, some of them wanted to become engineers, and some of them had dreams and ambitions, and now all this is gone and destroyed with the story of early marriage.

We will keep the recommendations for the end, I just want to conclude by saying that wars give rise to terrible phenomena, and the war of extermination was one of the most terrible wars in the history of the Palestinians, or rather the history of humanity. This war of killing, extermination, deportation, starvation, and thirst also led to social phenomena that would not have appeared in this way if there had not been a war. Thank you for listening, and I look forward to hearing your recommendations.

**Speaker #4: Sabreen AbeedAllah, SRH Projects Manager, Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS)**

Good evening everyone, and thank you so much for having such an important webinar.

There are moments when we feel excited to talk about interventions on early marriage and how all institutions are working hand in hand to address this phenomenon. Yet war reminds us of how fragile the entire system is despite all the interventions in place.

Unfortunately, women and girls are always the first to suffer, and they bear the greatest impact of war. I will try to return to the sense of motivation by speaking about our interventions and the focus on development efforts and policies. Let me begin by discussing the small but meaningful steps we are taking to address the phenomenon of early marriage.

It is our hope that through these development efforts and policies, several models have been established that strengthen community foundations and enhance resilience in confronting this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, as highlighted in the presentations by Mrs. Abir and Mrs. Sanaa, early marriage remains both a health and a social challenge, particularly in marginalized areas. As the Palestinian Medical Relief Society, we operate in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Today, I will focus on the different approaches adopted to address early marriage. I will begin by outlining four models that aim to strengthen women's and girls' access to services, based on evidence demonstrating their effectiveness in preventing and reducing early marriage.

The first is the one-stop approach, which involves providing all essential services and information for women and girls in a single location. This model ensures comprehensive care that addresses their physical, psychological, and social well-being in an integrated manner. This approach also strengthens the participation of girls and women. As Mrs. Amal mentioned, it can be particularly difficult for unmarried women to access services, especially when assistance is often linked to marriage.

Through the one-stop approach, we work to improve access to services for girls, women, and adolescent girls within a family-centered framework, ensuring that support is available to them regardless of their marital status.

The second approach is participatory, ensuring that women and girls remain at the center of all services and information provided. Their role should not be limited to simply receiving services; rather, they should be actively engaged in planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up.

This approach is not limited to the Medical Relief Society but is also adopted by other institutions that prioritize women's meaningful participation at every stage of service delivery and information dissemination.

The third approach is a rights-based approach. It affirms the right of all women and girls—and of all individuals—to access accurate health and social information tailored to their needs. This approach considers the full social context, including situations of war, prevailing customs and traditions, as well as the choices, desires, and preferences of women themselves.

The fourth and final approach is evidence-based, grounded in research, accumulated experience, and practical fieldwork. This knowledge is not limited to the Society alone but is developed in cooperation with various partners, including United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund, and local institutions.

These approaches translate into practical application. Today, I will briefly present some of the models we implement to respond to the needs of girls and women, with particular emphasis on marriage and child marriage. I will begin with the one-stop approach as applied in safe spaces.

When we speak about safe spaces, we are not referring only to physical locations. Safe spaces may be either physical or virtual. Their concept is based on bringing together professionals including doctors, psychologists, legal advisors, health workers, and midwives in one setting, while ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of services provided to women.

This model facilitates access for girls, women, and families to a comprehensive package of information and services. Many safe spaces are specifically designed to welcome girls, offering them an environment where they can share their experiences and receive holistic consultations. These consultations address their needs from health, legal, and psychological perspectives, ensuring an integrated response, particularly for women

and girls who are victims or survivors of violence. As mentioned, these safe spaces operate within primary health care centers, youth rehabilitation centers, and youth-friendly spaces in universities. I will later explain how this model contributes to the empowerment of girls. As Ms. Amal and Ms. Sanaa highlighted, access to information, awareness, and knowledge enables girls to make informed and decisive choices about their lives and to become agents of change within their communities.

Within these spaces, educational, counselling, and awareness sessions are provided alongside healthcare services. They also offer opportunities for professional and financial empowerment, which are just as essential as social and health-related empowerment. Through this comprehensive support, we help women and girls build resilience against the phenomenon of early marriage.

Another example is education for children, delivered within youth-friendly spaces at universities and in youth centers. Evidence shows that one of the most effective ways to communicate information to girls and young people is through their peers.

When we speak about children's education, it was implemented through several models. One of these was through mobile clinics operating within medical facilities. This made it much easier to reach communities that struggle to access health services, as well as young people within those communities.

Through this approach, youth were able to receive health and social information from other young people - peers speaking to peers.

In fact, the presence of educated young people in clinics has not only an impact on the local communities and the youth themselves, but also on service providers.

As service providers, we have often observed that the consistent involvement of young people who openly discuss early marriage and share their experiences from a personal perspective has helped ensure that girls and women receive accurate information.

When we refer to clinics and health centers, we are highlighting institutions that are often the most socially accepted spaces. While women and girls may face restrictions in accessing broader social services, society generally permits them to seek health services.

This presents a valuable opportunity to work closely with women and girls to address and prevent early marriage, benefiting from the higher level of social acceptance associated with these spaces.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the engagement of men and boys alongside girls when discussing issues related to marriage.

When addressing the phenomenon of early marriage, our focus is not solely on girls or women. We must also consider young men, who are future parents and spouses, as well as men who have the potential to drive societal change.

Moreover, when engaging young people, it is essential to recognize that digital reality is inseparable from the reality on the ground.

Our experience has demonstrated the enthusiasm and effectiveness of young people when they use digital platforms to raise awareness about early marriage. They play a crucial role in promoting understanding of the impacts of early marriage on girls and on society not only socially, but also economically and politically, both now and in the future.

I would like to return to the model introduced by my colleague Sanaa. In collaboration with United Nations Population Fund, we implemented this model effectively and observed its positive impact in addressing the phenomenon of early marriage: premarital counselling.

This initiative aimed to establish models and conduct studies on premarital counselling, based on the Medical Relief Society's belief that it should be integrated systematically. Premarital counselling is already part of the systems within the Ministry of Health and the legal courts. This model ensures that all groups - regardless of economic, social, or residential background - have access to this service.

Through the interventions we implemented, we experimented with several models of premarital counseling. Some were conducted through social gatherings aimed at raising awareness about premarital counseling and the consequences of early marriage.

These efforts also highlighted the different dimensions of premarital counseling including health, psychological, economic, and legal aspects while helping girls and boys better understand the legal framework associated with marriage.

The second component is marital guidance, designed for couples who are about to marry or who have been married for less than a year. It consists of four sessions, each focusing on a specific topic: health, family and social relations, financial planning, and understanding the marriage contract.

For many participants, these guidance sessions were the first time they had ever seen the marriage contract. Unfortunately, for some, the contract was only presented when the marriage official (Al-Ma'dhoun) came and drafted it. Had it been about a different agreement, couples would be able to review it several times.

Even though it was a relatively simple intervention, allowing girls and women to have a look and understand the marriage contract proved very valuable. For many, it was the first time they realized that the contract contained terms and clauses they had never been aware of. We offer customized individual counselling, based on the understanding that while every woman and girl is unique, all share fundamental rights and needs.

Lastly, I would like to tell you about Qaws and Yakeen who attended premarital counselling. During these sessions, they were able to speak frankly about expectations and responsibilities. They said that marriage is not an end in itself, but a shared responsibility that requires both psychological and physical maturity. They also gained knowledge about their legal rights and how to include clear terms in the marriage contract, which can protect them and clarify their mutual obligations. They experienced open discussions in a safe environment where their opinions were respected. They became more aware that entering into a marriage consciously is the best way to prevent early marriage. Thank you for your time.

## **Speakers #5: Gabriela Maria Espinosa, Protection Team Leader**

Thank you so much, and I'm super honored to be here. Having heard everything that has already been shared, I think there is very little to add to the amazing analysis, and information that has been shared. So, I will try not to duplicate. I will go fast without going as much in detail, because I think we already had very amazing presentations.

UNRWA has also conducted several surveys, analysis, and reports. The central part of our work is Gaza field office. There is the protection monitoring, where we are trying to do a daily work with observations, focal group discussions, and key informant interviews, to try to identify the key protection risks, and the things that have been changing during the war, and how the dynamics - and this has been already mentioned here - are shifting, or are worsening some of the risks that already exist, among which child marriage.

I won't go into too much detail, but like what has been mentioned, we have asked families of married girls about the reasons they believe girls are getting married. About 68% of respondents cited factors such as a lack of hope, the girls' perceived needs, and the sense of responsibility to help relieve the family's burdens or contribute to managing the family's critical situation. 39% mentioned a sense of pressure, and preserved community traditions. I believe that during times of conflict, this issue becomes even more critical. Communities need resilience, and there is a strong desire to maintain certain social structures and traditions. However, these needs must also be weighed against the risks involved. Conflict creates additional pressures, including the need to keep communities together, cope with displacement, loss of shelter, and reduced access to essential resources.

I think what has been said is very important. Limited access to resources has not only led families to adopt certain coping mechanisms but has also contributed to negative practices, including early marriage. We are working collaboratively to address these challenges by strengthening the capacity to prioritize, identify vulnerable groups, and improve their access to essential services.

Family problems also contribute to the issue. In overcrowded living situations, multiple extended families may share a single space, sometimes up to 40 members. These conditions can lead to internal conflicts and create pressures on adolescents, particularly girls, which families may see as reasons to marry them early. Additionally, overcrowding often results in less supervised interactions between adolescent boys and girls, increasing the likelihood of relationships developing in uncontrolled ways.

All of these factors occur in the context of conflict, where mental health challenges, limited resilience, grief, and stress further influence coping mechanisms. These circumstances significantly affect mental well-being. The responses we received indicate that early marriage is often seen as a coping mechanism. Families may consider it a suitable solution in the moment, without knowing what the future holds. Parents are frequently unsure whether they will have the time or resources to ensure a proper marriage for their daughters.

Decision-making capacity is often constrained by immediate pressures, stress, and difficult circumstances. As a result, choices are made based on the current situation rather than long-term planning. This coping mechanism emerges from familiar patterns and past experiences, but it is not necessarily a positive solution. While we are working actively to address this, it is important to understand the reasons families give for making such decisions and why they perceive them as necessary.

I think, already we shared experience, so I don't want to go into it again, but I just wanted to say there are many, many reasons and not only one. We could have experiences that flow across all the reasons, and this shows us that this is a complex situation. It is not only about awareness and access, it requires a lot of work integrated, because the reasons for why it is happening vary, and the experiences that the families are facing are very complex. We must work with the community hand in hand, with the families, with the authorities, with education, with health because it is a very complex multifaceted issue.

Regarding the consequences, I used the term "perceived" not to suggest they are unreal, but to highlight how the community views them, which is very important. I will leave it at that rather than detailing each one.

The perceptions of communities matter because, even when families make decisions based on social pressures, they are aware of potential negative outcomes. In our study, which included interviews with over 113 families, as well as through ongoing case management under UNRWA, families expressed concern about the serious consequences of early marriage. They recognized the health risks for adolescent girls, potential complications during childbirth, and the possibility of disabilities or other adverse health outcomes for their children.

One issue that is often overlooked, even as we work to end child marriage, is that early marriages in Gaza - according to the reports we have - sometimes result in immediate divorces. These divorces carry additional consequences, including legal complications, restricted rights, and limited access to resources. In some cases, the girls are not only divorced but also pregnant, creating extremely challenging situations for both them and their families. While families may initially view child marriage as a coping mechanism, they often end up having to manage the care of a new household under difficult circumstances. These are consequences that the community recognizes as critical, and it is essential to address them from the families' perspective to develop effective, community-based solutions.

We are working closely with organizations, and I think we have amazing examples of the amazing work that the communities and the organizations are doing to try to find an integrated approach.

Very quickly, what do we do? UNRWA has one added value, or an advantage built over many years of work: it operates through an integrated approach to response. We are one of the partners inside Gaza, that has the capacity to have an internally coordinated, integrated approach. We do continuous protection, risk monitoring, observations, focal group discussions, key informant interviews, to understand everything. We have a protection center, integrated site management, meaning in our areas, we do have focal points, in our shelters, we have women working groups, women support groups, we have linkage with women

organizations, so we do have a way to address these issues, from both a community and an integrated perspective.

We have established mobile and temporary services to reach areas with limited access, helping to close gaps in service delivery. These services provide integrated case management that combines child protection, gender-based violence (GBV) support, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). At the same time, they offer confidential internal referrals for education, health, legal assistance, civil documentation, and other essential services.

This system allows us to maintain a detailed approach to prioritization, ensuring that women and girls at risk receive the resources they need. It also prioritizes separated children, child-headed households, and other vulnerable groups, making sure they are identified, supported, and integrated even if they fall outside the traditional family structure.

Regarding the prevention of risk and mitigation in shelter sites, there was our strategical approach. We know much more has to be done, and we are super happy to go to the part of recommendations, and that UNRRA could also take part of these recommendations. However, we are trying to mitigate many of these drivers; thus, we're working very closely with Education, with Health, WASH inside UNRRA, and also in the cluster system. We are promoting, and working a lot in safe spaces, and age-appropriate activities, and the informal learning spaces.

Education is a key tool for addressing child marriage and improving the overall situation of children, because this issue cannot be tackled in isolation. To effectively prevent early marriage, we must address the broader risks that children face in Gaza today.

We work both within cluster initiatives and through individual safety audits, integrating the perspectives of women to identify strategies for reducing these risks. We also actively engage with caregivers, particularly for unaccompanied and separated children, who are at higher risk of being forced into or engaging in child marriage.

For UNRWA, the key priority is to ensure that we are seeing everything integrated, as part of the centrality of protection, that we are enforcing and enhancing the work of case management, even though it is strongly structured, and that we could identify all these issues to be able to find alternatives, to mitigate those risks in an innovative and appropriate principle way.

Maybe the final message is that this is something we are very happy to be doing jointly. It's a very complex situation, it's a very difficult environment, where resources and capacity to respond - that have been said before - are limited. As organizations, our biggest strength is the capacity to work together in a comprehensive way to be able to address and mitigate some of these issues.

Sorry for being fast, but we wanted to give you a little overview of how UNRWA is part of this integrated response. Also internally, we will maintain the approach that we have reached luckily over many years of experience, and we are putting our best effort to try to keep that system, working and closely coordinating with others. I let Maria conclude, and sorry if I went a bit overtime four minutes.

**Speaker #6: Maria Alvarez, Regional Child Protection Technical Lead, UNRWA**

Well, first of all, thank you, everybody, for the space, for participating in this very relevant and very interesting webinar. It's a pleasure and an honor to be speaking along with all the colleagues and the organizations that have been talking about the ground-level reality and the approaches and the recommendations moving forward. Before we start with the proper presentation, I think the idea of having this last intervention was as well to, so we've been hearing about the situation in both Gaza and the West Bank, but we wanted as well to bring up the broader situation of Palestinian refugees, particularly what is related to girls and child marriage.

And I think I will try not to bring more challenges than recommendations, but we wanted to do a bit of a reflection within the group of some of the challenges that UNRWA has been facing when addressing prevention and response to child marriage in the Palestinian refugee context. So, just to give you a bit of an overview, and I'm sure everybody is very familiar with UNRWA work in the region. UNRWA is currently working in five areas of operation, Gaza, West Bank, that for us are two different field offices, and Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

So, very different context with very different child protection concerns, but that also have some common root causes and trigger for what must be with child marriage and in general negative coping mechanisms around children. One of the particularities of UNRWA, and I think this has a lot to do with the way we address the issue of child marriage, is the fact that we are a service deliver agency, and we are providing direct services to over 2.5 million Palestinian refugee children across all field of operation. We speak about services, we speak about education, health, relief and social services, and camp infrastructure and camp improvements. So, our staff are in daily contact with over 2 million Palestinian refugee children every day. One of the challenges that we faced in the past in child protection generally, but also on child marriage is the fact that we are the direct service provider and we have been working quite in isolation in relation to other agencies and partners, and we haven't been that involved in some of the key activities for preventing such as advocacy and engagement with local authorities.

The framework for our child marriage work is child protection framework that has three main pillars: one is in child sensitive service provision and child rights, the second is in child safeguarding, and the third one is on child rights advocacy. So, I'm going to open the presentation myself to make sure that I follow all the issues that I wanted to cover. So, if we think about the situation of child marriage among Palestinian communities in all four countries, in terms of prevalence, one of the issues that we are facing as many other organizations is the issue of underreporting.

Many of the cases of the instances of child marriage don't get registered anywhere, and very recently we've found a very relevant number of cases looking just at our internal data sets, meaning UNRWA records of Palestinian refugees, also our data from EMIS (the Education Monitoring Information System) that records the dropouts, including those related to dropouts of girls caused by child marriage. The third one is the community engagement activities, such as what Gabriela was presenting just before, where we get the views of communities and girls and boys about child marriage. With all this information, we still feel that the numbers are quite underreported. In general, the figures that we've seen is that the percentage of girls that were married before the end of 18 years are slightly high among Palestinian refugee girls compared to other countries, like in Jordan.

In Lebanon, almost 25 percent of the Palestinian refugees from Syria that resettled in Lebanon and Jordan did marry before the age of 18. That is almost 10 points above the average for those two countries. In Syria as well, we are above 20 percent. As for the information from West Bank and Gaza, it has been already presented.

In terms of the root causes, there's nothing new to add on my end. Issues related to economic hardship and poverty. Four of our five areas of operation are in a current active conflict, or in the case of Syria, just getting out of it. So, it's either emergencies, conflict, or protracted crisis, and this brings another layer of triggers for marriage.

Regarding cultural and social norms, this has already been discussed. One of the root causes that we have observed is related to legal documentation and legal status with a relatively high number of girls agreeing to get married just to access legal documentation or additional services in the countries where they are living. In terms of our past approach and what our challenges were in areas we have operated, most of our work around responding to child marriage has been focused on our own services. The best example is our education service provision. So, it's basically working with our division of education, ensuring that girls, despite being married or pregnant or being child mothers, could remain in school.

Child protection mainstreaming has been a successful strategy, but we should have gone beyond our own service delivery and liaised with the service provided by the Ministry of Education and working in partnership with other partners and UN agencies, and this is the avenue we are trying to get into right now. Same with our health services, we have been working very closely with our health department to ensure that family planning and SRH services were provided to girls that have been early married. But again, we haven't done enough coordination with others or with the authorities of the Ministry of Health and Education. At community level, we've been working a lot with children, with girls, with boys. In terms of challenges, advocacy has been one of the gaps.

Data harmonization, we have extensive sources of information that do not speak to each other. If they were better connected, they could help us better identify cases of child marriage that need to be addressed and help us identify trends before the response level.

In terms of the legal framework and social norms, we're working for countries with different legal framework, and there's a lot of perception as well about what the law says. Like, very recently in Syria, we were having conversation about whether UNRWA could promote girls retention in schools after child marriage, because there's no clarity about what the framework says and the perception of how it's applicable to Palestinian communities.

Just to end, and very briefly, where we want to go in terms of prevention and response to child marriage. First, we are trying to coordinate much closely with other child protection and girls empowerment partners on the prevention and from the response side. We also want to strengthen our girls-led social behavior change and community awareness activities.

We want to ensure that girls are put at the center of all the campaigns and the actions in terms of prevention, and that they have a protagonist role in deciding their future. We also want to integrate learning from other partners, especially about child marriage prevention and response in emergencies while ensuring that we have a multi-sectorial approach, working with the livelihood, the education, and the health sectors for them to integrate prevention and response to child marriage in their actions, and not having a standalone child marriage.

Gabriela already mentioned how we are prioritizing girls at risk of child marriage in our cash for protection intervention. This is also something we want to extrapolate to all our fields. I'm working on a child protection system approach, ensuring that we are bringing together our social workers, our health workers and health staff, and our teachers to provide a protective space for girls to prevent and to respond to child marriage. And I think I'm going to stop here. I will allow questions, and once again, thank you very much for the space.

**Speaker: Evita Mouawad, RAF Coordinator, Q&A**

Thank you so, so much, Maria and Gabriela.

So, before we move on to recommendations, which I think we can all discuss together, there's one very striking question in the Q&A that really kind of got to me. I know Abir and Sana, you've been answering the Q&A as well, but I wanted to ask this to Amal as well. So, Amal, we have a question from Shaza, who's a RAF member and an academic who has worked a lot on child marriage research related to the Middle East region.

So, Shaza was asking essentially, Amal, how do we make sense of the conflict in Gaza? We know that many women and children lost their lives, but also most casualties have been men, and this has impacted also the rates of marriage, and with the displacement and families having to move a lot, this has also affected how people approach marriage. And then Shadha was also asking, taking all of this into consideration, the conflict, the violence, the displacement, are girls still kind of willing to get married early, still becoming sexually active early, or how has this impacted them? So, maybe Amal, if you can answer this question, how have all these factors, in your view, impacted the prevalence of child marriage in Gaza, but also the prevalence of early

pregnancies, considering the unfortunate death toll, the displacement, and all the violence that the community has experienced? I don't know, Amal, if you can answer that in a few words. Sorry, it's a big question.

**Speaker: Amal**

It's not surprising to hear this question. We also ask ourselves: how do people think of marriage in the midst of this nonstop killing and displacement, and the fire, and the planes, and the loss of thousands of people? This is a strange question. It's the same question, how women get pregnant in wartime? In the end, we conclude the following: What happens in Gaza happens in any area of conflict. Life always wins over death.

People are always searching for any way to create meaning and happy moments. The mother who lost her son, thinks about marrying off her other son to have a grandson named after his father who was martyred or to fill the loss.

We are really people who deserve life. Those who don't know the details of life in the Gaza Strip and in Palestine, are surprised by many phenomena. We have said that even when girls express a desire to marry and give their consent, from our perspective this cannot be considered legally valid, because they are still minors. Even when a girl says yes, she's young, and she's not responsible for her decision.

Therefore, we consider any marriage under the age of 18 to be a child marriage, a marriage of minors. For this reason, we prefer to describe it as "forced marriage," because girls in these situations are not active decision-makers but rather the ones being acted upon. I hope I answered the question.

**Speaker: Evita**

Thank you so much. Gabriela, did you have something to say on this as well, maybe very quickly, before we move on to the joint recommendations? I see your hand is up.

**Speaker: Gabriela**

I just wanted to add something to complement that. When we asked families and especially adolescents about the reasons behind early marriage and how they perceive it, the responses were very interesting. I think much of it relates to the burden placed on women in society and the expectations tied to their caregiving role

Many adolescent girls said they see marriage as a duty, as a way of supporting their communities by taking care for children who have been orphaned, or marrying men who have lost their wives and need someone to look after their children. Others saw it to ease the burden on their own families, especially on their fathers. I think it is very important not to overlook this point: women and girls in this society - as in many others - carry a double or even triple duty of care, and they do feel this responsibility.

So this adds to some of the reasons I mentioned earlier. In times of distress and deep crisis - especially when there is a heavy mental health impact - many girls are looking for a place to reinstate their life. As I said before, and I strongly agree, the will to survive and hold on to life is very strong.

I would like to add that there are many reasons and perspectives behind why families and girls may choose - or sometimes feel compelled - to enter into early marriages. The issue is highly complex, and it is important to have spaces like this where we can listen, understand, and analyze these different perspectives.

Approaching the problem from multiple angles allows us to design more effective interventions, rather than relying on a single, one-sided view. This insight was particularly evident from the adolescents themselves.

**Speaker: Evita**

Thank you, Gabriela, and Abir is actually saying that according to UNICEF's health data from January to August, we have 1,383 pregnant girls under the age of 18 in Gaza, so it does show that we still have this prevalence despite everything that is going on. Thanks, Abid, for sharing the data. Now, we just have a few minutes left, so I would like to do just a quick kind of tour de table on recommendations.

Abir, just in one minute, can you tell us for you what is the most important recommendation in terms of the data gaps and the information that you shared with us? If you could achieve one or two things, what would be the most important recommendations for you, Abir?

**Speaker: Abir**

Thank you all very much. I want to talk briefly about the recommendation. I don't want to go into all of them, but the recommendation that has to do with the data. We will make every effort to support the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in conducting regular, comprehensive, and integrated data collection on child marriage and the threats undermining child protection. The aim is to develop a holistic understanding of this phenomenon across the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, and to produce a clear analysis of regional differences, explanations, and recommendations that reflect the real context on the ground. This is recommendation number 1. Recommendation number 2 relates to data collection from the Shariah courts. As Mrs. Amal mentioned, some of the data is not computerized and exists only in paper records. This means that someone would need to manually search for these files, and access is not always guaranteed; sometimes it is permitted, and other times it is not. That is why we support the Shariah courts in computerizing their data systems, so that access to information can be regular rather than dependent on individual mood. We do not want to receive selective numbers, percentages, or data limited to certain time periods. We want to have accurate statistics. I also encourage all organizations working in child protection and providing services to girls of marriageable age to regularly publish bulletins and available statistics and information on child marriage in Palestine.

**Speaker: Evita**

Thank you, Abir. Thank you so much. And Sana, just in a few words for you, what are the most important recommendations, especially when it comes to the legal issues you mentioned during your presentation?

**Speaker: Sana**

Thank you so much. The current laws are indeed complex, and relying solely on them to combat this negative phenomenon would take considerable time. At the same time, we must continue working in parallel to strengthen domestic legislation, particularly laws aimed at ending early marriage.

It is equally crucial to continue emphasizing the promotion of positive social concepts, since war and the situation in the West Bank are fostering, as Amal mentioned, many harmful and risky practices within families and society. We must intensify efforts to promote positive values, reinforce the social and family fabric, and build the resilience of communities especially in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by ensuring that families and children have access to essential life needs such as education, health, and food.

Special attention should also be given to providing adequate housing. The Palestinian population is largely made up of youth, making this an ideal opportunity for them to actively participate in change. By involving young people in service delivery, awareness campaigns, and structured sessions - as our colleague Sabreen highlighted through "peer education" - they can contribute to combating negative practices, including early marriage. It is crucial to establish a structured framework for addressing this phenomenon, and it should be a priority for all organizations. As part of this effort, we will place significant focus on this issue in our programs and interventions in the coming years. Thank you.

**Speaker: Evita**

Thank you so much Sana. Amal, over to you. What are the few recommendations that you have in mind? Yes. Thank you, Amal.

**Speaker: Amal**

I will be brief. In addition to what my colleagues mentioned about ending the war and restoring normalcy - hopefully, there will be no more wars - it is essential to investigate the root causes of early marriage. The law also plays a crucial role by setting the minimum legal marriage age. Equally important is a prompt response to mitigate the impact of early marriage on girls, ensuring they have access to services and are at the center of programs. This allows them to actively participate in promoting behavioral change and raising awareness about early marriage, engaging men, parents, and families. Thank you.

**Speaker: Evita**

Thank you so much. I will also give the opportunity to Sabreen and UNRWA colleagues to share just their thoughts and some final recommendations. Sabreen, what is for you the key aspect that you would like us to focus on, and then for everybody to know, that they need to prioritize in terms of the child marriage response in the West Bank through the community outreach that you are doing as well? Thank you.

**Speaker: Sabreen**

I will be very brief. Early marriage is a multisectoral issue, similar to gender-based violence, and therefore has no single solution or approach. It affects all age groups and social classes. Addressing it requires coordinated efforts and engagement from all organizations, targeting all segments of society - including men, women, and girls - as well as religious, health, social, local, and public institutions. Addressing this issue requires not only the enactment of laws but also the active participation of adults, boys, and girls in combating early marriage. Joint efforts are essential to tackle the multifaceted impacts of this phenomenon.

**Speaker: Evita**

Thank you so much, Sabreen. Maria and Gabriela, any final words of advice and recommendations from your side? Please feel free to come in for a minute.

**Speaker: Maria**

There are many, and I think many have already been mentioned, but I would focus on working together on joint advocacy and humanitarian architecture and the development architecture for this issue to be prioritized, not only at funding level, but also in terms of approaches and how we can ensure that all sectors are keeping this very important issue in mind when designing and planning their interventions.

**Speaker: Gabriela**

Yes, I completely agree with everything that has been said. I would just like to emphasize that this work must be strongly embedded in community-based protection interventions. Working with the community, especially in Gaza, is essential, as it is beginning a very difficult and long-term process of reconstruction of not only physical structures but also social structures, where shifts in power relations and new vulnerabilities have unfortunately emerged as a consequence of these horrible two years.

I think it's crucial to allow enough time and space to address this issue not just through the rapid approaches used during emergencies, but by building engagement with communities. In particular, it's essential to strengthen the participation, voices, and perspectives of adolescent girls and boys, as well as the community

as a whole, so that we can tackle early marriage from a truly root-based approach. Of course, I won't repeat all the amazing points that have already been mentioned. Thank you.

**Speaker: Evita**

Thank you so much, colleagues. I know we're a bit overtime, but this is really such an important topic, and we really wanted to take the time to discuss it together and thank you so much for everyone who stayed until the end and for everyone who participated. Thank you so much to all our speakers. I'm really in awe of you, amazing ladies, and the work that you are doing.

Thank you, Abir, Sana, Amal, Sabreen, Gabriella, Maria. Thank you really to everyone who took part in this webinar. I really appreciate you all, and we hope that together we can have more of an impact.

Everything that was mentioned today will be shared with everybody, and we hope that these lessons will help everybody with their work in Palestine and in the region. Thank you so, so much, everybody, and have a good week. Thank you.